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PUBLISHED BY J. P. CHAPMAN.

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THE STATE SENTINEL.

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The Brigands of the Abruzzi.

By THOMAS S. JAY.

A stupendous amphitheatre of rocks rose to the clouds among the savage peaks of the southern Apennines. Their terrible and sublime attitudes overlooked both the Adriatic and Mediterranean.

A single form leaned from one of these fantastic cliffs, watching and listening, as if to ascertain the approach of some one in the plain below. Presently several others appeared, forming a group strongly picturesque. They were dark, uncouth-looking men, with broad hats slouched sulkily over their dark heavy eyes, their temples and necks covered with black, matted hair, their upper lips overgrown with shaggy moustaches and beards, in some descending to their breasts, and in others blackening the chin and cheeks with coarse curly curls.

"I swear," cried the first, "I heard him trampling yonder, among the loose stones, some of which rolled off the precipice and went leaping down into the stream."

"Fool," cried another, "I tell thee, no single traveller would venture on these steep, no human foot, except of some Austrian spy, or ferocious bandit, like me, would break the silence of these wilds."

"If I am a fool, Antonio, thou art a fool and but by to boot," rejoined Leonardo, sulkily. "Since thou burdest thy dagger in the heart of that Austrian stranger last week, and rifled him of his gold, thou art no longer a fool, but a robber."

"The blessed Virgin, protect me," he cried, in a low tone of inexpressible horror; the blessed Virgin protect me, for I am a lost man!"

She sat in the entrance of the cave, upon a broken rock—a magnificent woman, of a lovely yet undulating appearance. Her person commanding, dignified, and graceful—her face melancholy, beautiful, and majestic—her raven hair parted with severe simplicity over a pair of eyes that should have lighted the halls of an emperor. You saw in an instant, the splendid character which the frigid, cold, and unfeeling nature of the brigands had cast in a robber's cave, and upon a robber's bosom. In Egypt, she would have been a Cleopatra—in Asia, a Zensib—among the gypsies, a Meg Merrilies—in England, a Mrs. Siddons—in the unfortunate land of the Neapolitan, condemned by the iron hand of fate to be what the other world called a wild, high, and lonely forest, and upon the midnight cliff, the brigand's wife, but still a woman—without the pale of society—yet with the gentleness of human hearts beating in her bosom. She put on fierceness, as a language in which alone her wishes could be understood, and her humanity subdued.

Antonio rushed in breathless.

"What now, Antonio—thy master—speak quick!"

She rose like a tigress, sprang forward, and pierced with her great awakened eyes into the soul of the robber.

"No, nothing of him, except that—his laws are broken—his master—speak quick!"

"The messenger again panted for breath."

"Leonardo! that villain, I read with ease. He aims at some empire; what of him? Now thou hast breathed again!"

"He has earned a single traveller, and by this time, I fear, has hurried him headlong from Monte Gargano."

"Of heaven, will his thirst for slaughter be never slaked!" cried the angry woman, striding rapidly towards the cliff, as if to prevent, if possible, the consummation of the deed. "Yet he is powerful among the men—what warn in the absence of Leonardo, and follow him as a thief—led by the holy Virgin, look! they are grouped up yonder against the sky, on the very verge of the precipice. The deed is not yet done; see, he is bound, and the circle opens; Leonardo and Pissani have grasped him; now they stoop to gather their strength—God—death—what! Leonardo—villains—rebel—I will have thee fayed—Leonardo, ho!"

The ruffian roughly dragged the poor painter to the fearful scene. He who had looked upon the pinnacle of an Italian mountain, has beheld a sight perhaps magnificent beyond parallel. The clearness of the atmosphere, the depth of the sky, the blueness of the placid Mediterranean, the slopes of gorgeous and luxuriant vegetation which rises in the hills, the beds of fresh and verdant loveliness which he embosomed in the valleys, vast tracts of lemon and oranges sparkling and waving in the sun, and a river, not of water, but of sand, winding in many broad and graceful bends by wood and hill, by rock and garden, beneath impending town and ruined castle, and under the arches of bridges, broadly built of massive stones. Never was scene more wonderfully splendid, than that which the affrighted painter cast his eye in the awful moment when he was bound, and three peers and eager impatience, for the wretches loved the excitement of such a scene.

"Hast said thy pater-noster, painter?" said one.

"Hast confessed thy sins?" asked another.

"Hast told thy beads?" demanded a third.

"For the love of Madonna, friends, do not put me to this cruel death!"

"Thou art late in thy application," said Leonardo, "when the brigand's thirst for blood is up, he must have the draught, cost what it may."

They drew him to the edge, and Leonardo deliberately motioning the strongest of the party to assist him, two seized him by the feet and shoulders, the third by the arms, as well as his hands, were closely bound, and lifted him over the brink. He closed his eyes with a convulsive shudder—one or two entreaties were choked in his throat.

"Farewell, painter," cried the ferocious Leonardo, "a pleasant journey to thee! it is a long one, but thou wilt not be long on the way."

Another moment, and the world had lost the best paintings which ever graced the walls of its galleries and palaces, when the shout of Madonna, from below, arrested the brutal arm of Leonardo.

"Per diavolo!" he said, "Madonna! there will be breakers ahead."

"Doavilo!" cried the rest; "if the old beldame has said away a minute longer!"

But they did not decently finish their atrocious deed, without paying her the respect of waiting, although the temptation of throwing a man three thousand feet off a precipice was almost too powerful to be resisted.

Madonna mounted the acclivity, she knew their natures well; her horror and impatience had, the moment before, turned her into a threat and reviling; and she had calmed herself now to a sterner mood.

"What hast thou thy steps here, amidst the solitude of the Abruzzi?" said Leonardo, who from some latent association, or an inherent ferocity of nature appeared from the first, to conceive hatred against the unfortunate, and to be fatally bent on his destruction.

"A transient disposition like this own," replied the other.

"Say rather the disposition of a spy," cried Leonardo, approaching him, and clenching his brawny fist in his face, while his white teeth shone through his snarling lips and raven beard.

"I tell you, comrades," continued the ruffian, "you may like the amusement of every wandering vagrant's society, and believe the tale of every desperate traitor, but even my fact I would keep no terms with these wretches. Let this prating calf die for his intrusion."

"Leonardo," cried Antonio, "I have called thee a fool; in truth, thou art a villain as well. I protest against thy barbarity. Our captain, Leopoldo, though now a prisoner, is a victim rather for the woman's arm, or rather, her eyes."

"I understand no just, fair lady. This slave is, in our belief, a spy—some Austrian renegade—some Spanish traitor—sent, peradventure, by the hands who are smothering our gold. They would not have a Spanish steel, we had better lay down our weapons at once."

"Thou poor youth," demanded Madonna, "cease thy fears. If not here to do us harm, what wild expedient hath tossed thee among the heights of Abruzzi?"

"I am, by profession, a poor painter, without a calling or a friend. I wandered here to study nature, that I may transfer her features to my canvases."

"A false tale," cried Leonardo; "painters have their ease too well, and have little to do with nature. Spangiolito sleeps in the gorgeous halls of the Spanish vicar. Neither he nor his guard hunt the peaks of the Abruzzi. I see not why his life should be spared."

"He is no painter," cried several voices; "he comes here a spy, perhaps a cardinal, perhaps a Spanish noble. I say, give him a sound swing from the rocky ledge of your stream."

"Youth," said Madonna, "I would save thy life; tell me truly, art thou what thou professes to be?"

"By the blessed Redeemer, by the holy Mother, dear Lady, I am."

"Canst thou paint well, then?"

"I may not say of myself such a thing, but my hand is familiar with the pencil."

"Soldiers," said Madonna, in a good-natured voice, "come, I will wager with you for this youth's word, he is an expert painter, to which he is accustomed. Well used to bribery in elections at home, they would exhibit a singular departure from their principles and practices in omitting it here, where they have so much at stake. Besides, the majority of shrewd thinkers believe that several things are more to be gained by bribery than by election, and they take for granted that a thing done once may be done again. Therefore we advise all who would keep the ballot boxes free from impurity, to watch carefully."

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"Selfish knaves," cried one; "play you this sport alone! Should ye not, in the absence of your chief, do me the poor honor of inviting me to your amusements?"

"You are welcome," growled Leonardo, fiercely, with the air of a hungry dog, whose bone has been just wrung from his teeth; "although uninvited, you are welcome."

"But who is this wretch, the doomed victim of your displeasure—what?"

She placed her finger upon his forehead, to steady his palsied and ghastly features, while his languid limbs hung nerveless in their tight bands.

"Villain, by the Virgin this is a boy—youth—unarmed—helpless—bound!" she took between her thumb and finger a fold of his worn garments; "poor, too—and, perhaps, an outcast and a victim like yourselves."

"Ay, and the first word he spoke," exclaimed one of the band, "was a hatred and defiance to priests and tyrants."

"Why, Leonardo, this is low game—this is insignificant prey—this is a victim rather for the woman's arm, or rather, her eyes."

"I understand no just, fair lady. This slave is, in our belief, a spy—some Austrian renegade—some Spanish traitor—sent, peradventure, by the hands who are smothering our gold. They would not have a Spanish steel, we had better lay down our weapons at once."

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